



# Building evaluative capability in schooling improvement

Helen Timperley

## Building Evaluative Capability through Planning

Two processes need to be evident if planning within schooling improvement is to build evaluative capability .

- Develop an effective and practical plan that is understood and owned by the participating schools and forms the basis of agreed actions in the next cycle of activity.
- Those involved understand the principles underpinning effective planning processes so that in the future they are able to develop their own plans in association with, or independently of, external expertise.

This second process was not evident in most of the observed meetings. Rather clusters were learning how to plan by formulating a plan. This process is likely to be effective in developing this understanding only if the principles underpinning particular planning decisions are made explicit throughout the process.

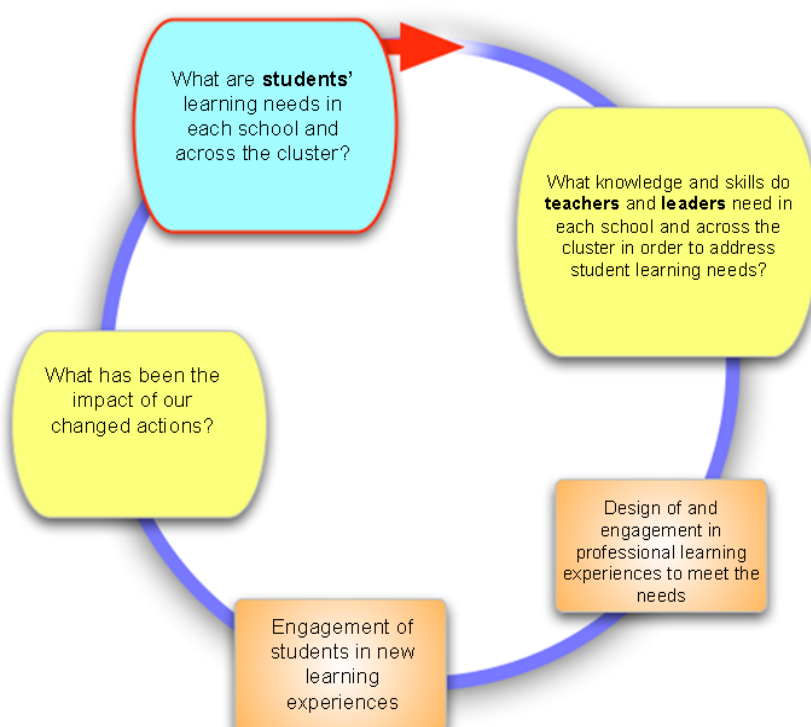
Given the brief of the evaluation project, the lens we have brought to the analysis of the planning process focuses on the second of these two processes, that is the extent to which the school leaders' involvement in cluster planning activities provided opportunities to build evaluative capability within the cluster. Hopefully, by doing so, the participating leaders will be able to utilise their experience in becoming more expert planners independently of external expertise when moving towards sustainability. This analysis does not attempt to comment on the quality of the actual plans because this will be judged through the value added analysis. A schooling improvement plan is only as effective as its resulting impact on student achievement.

Building evaluative capability is assumed to be a process of professional learning that ultimately impacts on student learning. The analysis framework, therefore, is based on an adaptation of the knowledge building through cycles of inquiry diagram to identify the key processes for cluster planning (Figure 1). By taking this focus, it is not our intention to suggest that other aspects of planning are unimportant, but rather they are not the focus of this analysis. Similarly, it is not envisaged that any particular planning event will cover all elements of the cycle, but rather some will be foregrounded and others backgrounded. It is quite possible that processes not observed were present in other planning meetings, and so comment is sought from the clusters on other planning events.

Within each part of the cycle, a set of principles underpin effective planning decisions. In the following tables, we have identified some of the principles in the left hand column with some actions typically associated with these principles in the middle column. The actions identified are intended as illustrative and stated in ways that could be applied to a range of contexts because there are many possible actions in any particular planning situation.

Figure 1

Inquiry and knowledge building cycles for cluster planning



## Planning Principles and Associated Processes

What are **students'** learning needs in each school and across the cluster?

### Planning Principles

#### Students' learning needs

Planning for schooling improvement begins with a detailed analysis of student achievement to provide high quality baseline data upon which targets can be built

Progress made since the previous plan was formulated is assessed to identify effectiveness and what needs to be adjusted

Set new targets— may be over more than one year

Once progress has been assessed, decisions are made about what needs to stay, what needs to go, what needs to change in terms of targeted student learning needs.

Once the cluster plan is developed, each school develops its own implementation plan

### Associated planning processes

- Review / identify long and short term **targets** for students using existing data
- Undertake a detailed achievement analysis in the curriculum area of interest for the target students in each school - checking analysis with multiple sources of data
- Identify what target groups of students already know and can do
- Identify what they need to learn and do
- Review achievement data against previously set explicit targets (in the previous plan)
- Identify areas of good, adequate and low progress against the targets
- Base targets on what students already know—make them challenging but realistic
- Focus targets on acceleration above what is expected particularly for lower achieving students
- Check progress towards targets regularly
- Analyse the improved outcomes – Are they good enough? What will it take to sustain them?
- Analyse the “no or little progress” outcomes – Should they continue to be a target?
- Decide – Is it time to expand (more year levels, more curriculum areas)? Is it time to consolidate? Is it time to have another go?
- Elements of the cluster plan that a school is engaging in are included in school strategic and annual plans

### Targets

Targets should have been identified in the previous plan and differentiated for different sub-groups of students.

It is important to agree on acceptable rates of progress prior to the analysis.

What knowledge and skills do **teachers** and **leaders** need in each school and across the cluster in order to address student learning needs?

### Planning Principles

#### Professional learning needs

Plans are built on an explicit shared understanding of the underlying causes of the student achievement gains and problems over which those involved have some control

Underlying causes identified by the planning group are critiqued and negotiated with those who have an interest

### Associated planning processes

- Questions to ask and evidence to find:
  - To what extent do we trust sources of evidence?
  - What do we think has led to improved / not improved outcomes?
  - What other kinds of **evidence** do we need in relation to **leadership** and **teaching**?
- Discuss the causal inferences made by the planning group to find out the extent to which they are shared by those who have an interest (e.g. do the teachers agree that they could be using more effective strategies)
  - If not shared, set up some checking processes (e.g. What are the planners' reasons and evidence? What are the teachers'? How will you assess who is right if there are **differences**?

### Using indicators as evidence

Many indicators could be used. Two might be amount of engaged instructional time or the frequency of higher level talk in the curriculum area in classrooms. See position paper on classrooms. Others might relate to teaching strategies or leadership

### Resolving differences

Resolving differences doesn't mean everything grinds to a halt e.g. if teachers don't agree that teaching is a problem, test this by engaging in professional development and changing the teaching.

## Design of and engagement in professional learning experiences to meet the needs

### Planning Principles

Courses of action explicitly address identified causes and are most likely to make a difference

Expertise to develop the new knowledge is identified and engaged

Links between multiple courses of action are identified to ensure a coherent whole – no serious gaps or inconsistencies

### Associated planning processes

- Find out about recent research in the area of focus
- If professional learning is a course of action, then begin by **asking leaders and teachers**
  - How have we contributed to existing student outcomes?
  - What do we already know that we can use to promote the targeted outcomes?
  - What do we need to learn to do to promote the targeted outcomes?
  - What sources of evidence / knowledge can we utilise?
- Find the **approaches that have been proven to work**
- Identify how those approaches need to be contextualised for this cluster.
- Identify the expertise needed to keep moving ahead
- Is the **expertise** within the cluster or external to it?
- Align **contracts** to required expertise
- Identify the personal demands e.g. is any individual involved in more than one substantial initiative?
- Identify the theoretical links e.g. if new teaching practices and student responsibilities are being developed in one curriculum area, how do they relate to another?
- Identify other cluster activities and the overall coherence of the plan

#### Asking leaders and teachers

Answering these questions helps to build teachers' evaluative capability.

#### Approaches proven to work

Don't flounder around trying to reinvent the wheel. The research on improving student learning has taken off in the last few years. Ask your cluster co-ordinators.

#### Expertise

Courage is needed here to take a hard look at whether the expertise previously engaged is working for students.

#### Align contracts

Be careful not to give different parts of contracts to different organizations when approaches need to be coherent.

## Engagement of students in new learning experiences

### Planning Principles

**New learning experiences for students**  
Level of implementation in classrooms is monitored to identify the effectiveness of the professional learning

Level of implementation at school level monitored to identify the effectiveness of leadership learning

### Associated planning processes

- Are the teachers able to / willing to **implement** the new practices with integrity?
- What further professional development / accountability needs to be instituted to ensure implementation?
- Is the leadership in the school able to / willing to **implement** the new practices with integrity?
- What further professional development / accountability needs to be instituted to ensure implementation?

#### Checking implementation

Observations of leadership and teaching practice is critical to understanding implementation success.

## What has been the impact of our changed actions?

### Planning Principles

Impact of school and cluster activities are assessed

New targets and ways to monitor them are set for student achievement, teaching and **leadership**

### Associated planning processes

- Assess achievement using targets in schools' strategic and annual plans, and those in the cluster plan
- Base targets on existing achievement and professional **practice**
- Establish differentiated targets for different groups of students and teachers
- Work out ways to monitor them for both teachers and students (short and long term)
- Develop a workable timetable that balances resources used with information obtained

The monitoring of these targets then become the basis for the next review and planning cycle.

### Additional issues to consider

Building evaluative capability through planning based on the inquiry and knowledge-building cycle is partly dependent on other things being in place. These things go across all phases of the cycle.

All those who need to know are fully informed

- Develop induction processes for new leaders or teachers
- Discuss the plan with anyone responsible for implementation to get their reaction and **input**

Ideas offered are critiqued for their worth, the evidence underpinning them is demanded.

- When ideas are presented, those presenting them are asked about their underpinning theories for improvement and the evidence on which those are based.
- A range of voices are invited and heard
- Hunches are subject to systematic testing

Roles and responsibilities to enact the plan and achieve the targets are identified

- What are the cluster leaders' **roles** ?
- What are the school leaders' roles?
- What are the teachers' roles?
- What are the board of trustees' / whanau roles?
- What are the students' roles?

The content and processes for collegial **accountability** are agreed before things go wrong

- Establish how the roles inter-relate and what inter-dependencies exist
- Identify processes for holding each other to account
- Use the processes during planning meetings

Cluster structures need to help, not hinder, the agreed actions and outcomes

- Review existing cluster structures for the new plan and decide whether they need to be revised

### Leadership

Make sure teaching and leadership practice is included in the targets and monitoring otherwise there will be no way of telling whether progress in achievement (or lack of it) is an implementation issue or problem with the plan.

### Practice

Changes in leadership practices are often neglected because leaders develop the change agenda and don't identify their own difficulties and what they need to do to improve.

### Getting Input

This does not necessarily mean getting a commitment because sometimes commitment follows involvement. However, if you are open to improvement, involving them may lead to a better plan.

### Roles

Ensure these roles develop evaluative capability and do not leave key players dependent on others in the long term.

### Accountability

Accountability in this sense means holding each other to account so mutual responsibilities are defined and agreed actions happen.





## Roles and responsibilities

When schools within a cluster are under stress from trying to improve achievement, the temptation is for external providers to take over many of the planning functions by asking them what they want and compiling a plan on their behalf. This process was evident in most of the observed meetings across the clusters. While this relieving of the burden of planning may be appropriate in the early stages of a schooling improvement initiative, it is important that roles and how the cluster members interrelate with external providers are made explicit so they can be periodically reviewed and that external providers do not end up taking over the legitimate roles of school leaders. Roles and responsibilities for the Ministry of Education, professional development providers, school leaders and teachers should be defined in ways that explicitly builds school leaders' evaluative capability. For many clusters, this role is very different from that typically taken, particularly by the Ministry of Education. Some suggestions about roles and who might fulfil them that can be debated in the cluster and adapted to fit particular circumstances follow. The roles and responsibilities described are not intended to be either exhaustive or prescriptive.

### **Cluster leadership roles (e.g. Ministry of Education co-ordinators, contracted cluster co-ordinators, steering committees)**

- Act as a conduit between national schooling improvement priorities and the clusters and thus submit funding applications and milestone reports, and organise contracts (Ministry of Education)
- Ensure they have sufficient specialist knowledge of research related to schooling improvement approaches with proven effectiveness in raising achievement to bring to the cluster for consideration
- Assist schools to complete a coherent plan that is consistent with research about effective schooling improvement and to ensure systems are in place to monitor its implementation and outcomes
- Assist schools to develop roles and responsibilities that build capability to plan and implement (not just implement) what is decided

To do this cluster leaders need to have particular kinds of knowledge and skills that include the following:

- Ministry schooling improvement priority strategies and contracting arrangements;
- Knowledge of the cluster context, particularly the diversity of schools in the cluster
- Cluster activities related to the plan at the level of the classrooms, schools, professional development and the cluster either through direct observation or evidence-based reporting;
- Research related to effective approaches to schooling improvement;
- Skills to challenge, critique and debate alternative approaches with the schools.

### **Professional development facilitator roles**

- Develop the specific knowledge and self-regulatory learning processes of leaders and teachers in schools within the cluster so that the development of evaluative capability goes beyond contracted experts

### **School leader roles (Principals, middle managers, lead teachers)**

- Ensure alignment between cluster priorities and school priorities and other initiatives within the school
- Promote, organise and participate in teacher professional development
- Develop the skills and knowledge to manage the change process within own school
- Set up systematic observation of teachers' practice so implementation problems can be identified and resolved;
- Set up systematic feedback processes on own leadership effectiveness so problems can be identified and resolved

### **Teachers**

- Develop evidence-informed inquiry into own practice as the basis for identifying professional learning needs
- Understand the differentiated targets set for students as the basis for monitoring progress
- Commit to professional learning as a process of change